

Of Heroes and Kings

Elaine Nolan

This is a work of fiction.

While all the historical sites referred to are real, every effort has been made to ascribe and relate their history as accurately as possible, otherwise, the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

© 2014 Elaine Nolan

The right of Elaine Nolan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9930026-1-8

A 40 *From Now* Publication

FOR 'GUSSIE' AND CATHERINE

The two best teachers and guides

No longer in the world

But the fire ignited

In one little girl

Lives on...

And burns brighter

for having known them

.

Prologues

I

The old man stood in the shadows, watching, as the hero of a hundred battles struggled to keep on his feet. The wind whipped the old man's cloak, but the ancient Druid paid no heed. His attention focused on the lone figure remaining on the bloodied battlefield.

With his spear as an aid, the injured warrior staggered across the dead to a tall rock nearby, scavenging for ropes, belts, anything along the way. He lashed what he found about his body and tied himself to the stone, upright and standing so that his enemies remaining at the edge of the battlefield would think him still capable of battle, and would come no closer. He heard wings flapping close by, a distinctive caw, and looked up to the darkening sky. A raven circled overhead before coming to rest upon the rock, its long beak making a play for his blood-matted hair. He jerked his head away and screamed at it, calling it a demon, an evil spirit. The bird hopped to the edge of the stone and jumped, but before reaching the ground, transformed into the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The wind whipped at her long red hair, her clothes, and she revelled in it, delighting in

the chaos.

“You,” he growled, “I should have known.” She merely smiled, circling the stone and the man tied to it, stroking him across the arms and chest as she passed by. He feebly attempted to push her hand away.

“Poor Cúchulainn,” she purred, her voice deep and enticing. “Forever trying to be the hero.” She leaned closer and whispered in his ear. “Always choosing the lost cause, and now you've chosen your last.”

“Get away from me,” he growled, his breathing laboured, his body wracked with pain and injuries. He knew his end was near, but he refused to give in to her seduction, tempting as it was. He would fight her to his last, dying breath. She wouldn't win him over. He wouldn't succumb. He would die like a man. Her hand caressed his bloodied face.

“Foolish man, have it your way, but soon you will be mine. All who die come to me, sooner or later,” she laughed.

He shut his eyes to her, and the laughter died away. The urge to sleep was overwhelming but he resisted its lure of peace and rest. When he opened his eyes again, the Mórrígan was gone, and only a single raven's feather remained.

II

Interpreting prophecies proved to be less a science and more an art form, oftentimes resembling the ramblings of madmen and lunatics than of sane or rational men. They came from the minds of people who saw the world with different eyes, seeing more than the ordinary person could glimpse.

The old man sifted through scraps of paper, some so delicate and seeming older than time itself. Others relatively new, but all said the same thing. Sometime in the third decade of the sixth millennium, an heir to the ancient Ard Rí, the High Kings, would be proclaimed and announced to the world.

The old man knew all of this, he'd studied the texts for years, but always hoped to glean new information every time he read them. With the year now closing on 2000, and all the fears of the millennium bug long past, what the masses didn't realise was the world already entered its sixth millennium, a world far older than Christian or Julian calendars allowed for. Only the Druids knew the true time and year, these Keepers of the Records, passed down from one High Druid to the next.

The old man sat back and sighed, confident in the knowledge that the Heir would come in his era. It now fell to him to ensure success, ensure the continuation of the line of kings. He had more planning to do, people to orchestrate, rituals to prepare.

III

1996

She wrapped the new-born tightly in the blanket against the wintry chill and plotted her escape. They'd made her give birth on the cold earth mound just to fulfil their ridiculous prophesies but she knew her part was over; they had no further use for her. She was now a liability. She'd already tried to hide before, to escape from them, but being heavily pregnant made her easy to find, even easier to manage and control, and she hated them for it.

They gave her something to drink, to help with the labour pains, something herbal that tasted utterly vile, but as weak as she now felt following the birth, she still had enough strength to stand, to walk, to run if she needed to. They helped her to her feet, still holding her daughter close to her, trying to keep her warm, keep her safe as the child's cries pierced the frosty air.

The old man held his arms out to take the child, but she clutched her even closer, not wanting to surrender her, to give her over to the man she thought of as an evil old wizard. If she gave her daughter away then what had she left to bargain with? Only holding onto her child gave her any hope of staying alive.

It hurt to walk, but damn it, she would walk past him,

would not let him see the pain she still endured, would not let him see her weakened and vulnerable. She was a Queen after all, descended from a long line of Celtic Queens; she could not afford to show any weaknesses. Not to him.

With no immediate means of escape, she complied with their demands for the moment, get in the car, get in the house. Simple instructions that she followed in uncharacteristically subdued manner. She'd let them think the birth weakened her, made her passive. She'd let them think she'd not risk her child's life, but in the early hours of the morning when the house was still and quiet, she stole away. She'd nursed the child and the baby now slept, full and contented for the moment, oblivious to the fight for freedom her mother was about to make.

Getting out of the house proved easy, no creaks or groans of doors or floorboards betrayed her. She'd parked her car at the top of the driveway, and allowed it to coast down the short hill to the gate, tapping the brakes as she pulled onto the main road, only then daring to start the engine. Her heart pounded in her chest until the lights of the village disappeared in the rear view mirror. She drove to Dublin, guessing she could hide in the city, become another single mother looking to start a new life. But her freedom was short lived. The old man found her within days, snatching the child from her arms as the others held her back, restraining her, despite her attempts to fight them off. The old man gave her

that cold glare that always terrified her.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find you?” he growled at her, “that I would allow you to take her away from me?”

“She’s not yours to take,” she answered defiantly. He stepped closer to her, towering over her, intimidating her.

“Do not defy me if you wish to remain alive or ever see her again,” he said before turning to leave, taking the baby with him.

“She’s my child,” she screamed at him. The old man paused and half turned to her, a triumphant grin on his face.

“She’s mine now,” he answered, laughing as her screams mingled with her baby’s cry.

IV

2001

The old man found the boy in an alleyway, dressed in rags, covered in filth and dirt. And savage, to the point of being dangerous. Yet the old man remained determined, the boy was far too precious. Winning him over would take time, and a lot of patience. The wildness would have to be overcome, but then again, the old man mused, the wildness was part of who he was, what he was. It could not be erased. But if it could be harnessed then the possibilities were endless. First, he needed to gain the boy's trust.

The old man sat at a sidewalk café table. This position gave him a clear view of the alley and the paper bag he placed there. He left the bag open, hoping the scent of hot food would entice the boy out of hiding. The object wasn't to capture him. Not yet. It took a lot of researching and backtracking through records to get to this point, where he now tried to win over a feral child.

The old man thought Cúchulainn's ancient bloodline erased from the world; the original candidate killed by a bomb, and covered up as a terrorist attack. Desperation spurred him on and he returned to his carefully preserved records, and at first glance, all seemed lost, but a glimmer of hope shone through, only two

generations old. The bloodline wouldn't be pure, but there it was, a remnant of the blood. This child he now attempted to win over, the only living descendant of the greatest Irish warrior.

Finding him in an American city seemed an impossible task, yet here he was and from information the old man obtained from American social services, the boy's mother died a drug user, selling her body many times to serve her habit, leaving the boy an orphan and homeless. Now, here he was. Just shy of seven years old and already a survivor. Perhaps he was the true heir after all. Time would tell.

Over the following days and weeks, the meals came regularly, the old man waiting closer each time. The boy grew more confident and bolder with this generous stranger, even being so daring as to snatch the bag from the old man's hand before diving back to his hideaway.

Until the day the old man arrived without food. The boy snarled and ran away. The next day proved better. A snarl, but he stayed. The following day, a grunt replaced the snarl. On the fourth day, he uttered his first word - "Food". The old man held out his hand and simply replied, "Come". The boy stared at him for a moment.

"I won't hurt you," the old man said. "Come with me and we will both have something to eat."

"Why?" the boy still wary of this stranger.

“I can give you a better life than the one you have now,” the old man replied. “You will never be hungry again. I will send you to the best schools where you’ll learn about the world, and how to succeed in it, unless you would rather stay here, picking food out of trashcans?”

The boy thought for a moment then slowly reached out to take the old man's hand.

“Trust me Setanta, and I will give you the world,” he promised the boy.

Chapter 1

May 2026

Rían stepped from the train at Heuston Station, Dublin slinging her overnight bag across her shoulder. Despite being summer, an early morning chill still lingered and she zipped up her jacket. She readied her ticket for inspection. Despite the presence of automatic ticket readers, Irish Rail continued to carry out impromptu inspections, checking ID's and digital info. They had reason to be cautious. A scam concerning forged annual tickets operated for years. It was Rían's first investigative piece and her baptism of fire into journalism. Peter stood by the gate, smiling as she approached.

"Good morning, kiddo," he said.

"Hey babe, how are you this morning?" she replied. At close to 70 years old Peter blushed at being called a babe, but loving it all the same.

"Who's on your hit list today?" he asked.

"President Robertson."

"Jaysus, I remember him when he was Taoiseach (*Prime Minister*). You'll need your wits about you interviewing that one, girl."

"He's going to need his," she replied, moving on.

“I’ll be watching you. I’ll let you know how you do,” he said before remembering what day it was and shouted after her.

“Good luck tonight,” he said and she turned around to him. “We all voted for you, so you better have that award with you tomorrow morning,” he said.

She laughed, giving him a mock salute before continuing out the front of the station, towards the buses and Luas. She normally walked to work, but with an overnight bag in tow, she opted for jumping onto the next Luas, the inner-city tram, that came along. At O’Connell Street, she changed to the Metro going to St Stephen’s Green West.

Ireland International Media began in a little office in the Dublin suburbs and expanded aggressively, now occupying prime real estate on St Stephen’s Green East, an elegant Georgian building. IIM jumped into digitalisation at the right time and now provided a service on a par with the State owned RTÉ, with radio, eFone and eNote News and Headline services to all mobile phones and handheld devices as well as providing digital TV and web editorials on a broad range of subjects. Rían Breasel fell into the ‘broad range’ category, focusing on the sciences, technology and her main love, the environment and all related issues. On environmental issues, she made her role, not as an eco-warrior but an advocate, using the media to highlight new technologies that would benefit everyone without harming the world. With the

oil fields having dried up about 10 years previous and gas now suffering the same fate, every new development on fuel replacement interested her. Yet she also found herself thrust into politics. Not her first choice of assignments nor did she have a liking for it, but after finding her feet at IIM, discovered an aptitude for political analysis and an ability to read between the lines.

She began her career by accident, dropping out of Ancient Celtic History studies, in part out of rebellion and because at 19 years old, had no clue what she wanted to do with her life. She changed to a journalism course and found a liking and a knack for words. Her first few pieces brought her to the attention of one of the country's longer established newspapers where she fell under the wing of a veteran investigative journalist. From then on, she was hooked, but life often took funny turns, and three years ago she landed a hotly contested job with the newest media group. Now at the age of 30, on this very night she would face her biggest challenge of her career to date; a public vote of the Irish people on their media and its personalities. She'd never been a contender before, and still didn't understand why she was short-listed this time, but it was good for IIM, and IIM had been good to her.

She emerged from St Stephen's Green, jaywalking across the road, not waiting for the pedestRían lights to change. Traffic in

the heart of the city was restricted to buses and taxis during the daytime so the danger was minimal. She bound up the granite steps and greeted Louise at reception, picking up her messages before heading for Editorial. Later, she'd venture across the hallway to Broadcasting for the televised political programme, but before then she had a piece to get out and wanted to review her notes on the latest bio-fuel to hit the market. She'd uncovered serious flaws in their research and she doubted she would be popular when it went to print. Later that morning she arrived in the prep room, allowing the hair stylist to go through the usual routine of straightening her unruly locks while Derek fussed with her wardrobe. Her personal favourite was the well-cut pinstripe trouser suit she always wore and she didn't know why Derek got in such a tizz; the suit was her trademark. He sat down beside her, looking solemn.

"We need to talk about what you're going to wear tonight," he began, "I have a choice of two outfits, one I'm guessing you won't like but I think it's fabulous, the other I won't like, but you'll probably go for it."

"What are they?" she asked and he disappeared for a moment, returning with both outfits; one was a dress and he was well aware of her dislike of dresses. The other was trousers with a flowing wrap skirt attached and a somewhat revealing lacy top. The gown he picked would flatter her body shape with a full-

length skirt that draped well.

“I’ll take the dress,” she said, stunning Derek. He looked at her in suspicion, but she just shrugged. “The dress. I’ll go with that,” she reiterated. Derek took a deep breath.

“You’re sure?” he asked, unaware the IIM bosses already imposed the choice on her in the form of a strong suggestion.

“Yeah,” she sighed. He left her to the rest of her prepping, partly out of fear she would change her mind. She put the dress and Derek out of her mind, returning to her notes, running through them before facing the President. She knew he’d be a tricky customer and older, more senior hands tried to counsel and caution against using her usual interview techniques. Derek handed her the last item required before going on air, a pair of clear-lens glasses, the boss’s idea, thinking it would add a level of maturity and authority to her look. She took her seat and waited for the show to begin.

Chapter 2

The recently renamed New Point Depot in Dublin's East Wall hosted the Media Awards Ceremony and several Rían's co-workers earned nominations within their own fields. Showing a united IIM front they arrived together, emerging from the car, with Ed, her editorial boss stepping out first, the rest following. Being the most junior, in terms of age and length of service, Rían exited last and received a cheer from the waiting crowd. Embarrassed, she blushed and gave a brief wave to those watching outside the perimeter. More cars pulled up behind them and the crowd's attention turned to the latest arrival, their renewed screams drowning everything else out. The IIM team turned to have a look and Ed gasped.

"It's Seth Morand," he explained. Rían gave the man a brief glance, but other than he seemed a good-looking guy, didn't see why all the fuss. She shrugged at Ed. Her boss shook his head at her. No doubt he'd educate her and give her the low-down at some stage during the night. Ed was a notorious and unashamed namedropper, but in the media game it all counted and when it came to getting exclusives, there was no better man to secure them. Inside they sat together, again showing the united IIM team. In truth they were a good bunch of people with no falseness to the image projected, each person a valued member of

IIM. The organisation themselves did their best to promote a positive staff ethos and the group photos showed genuine smiles.

After dining, the awards part kicked off and the Political Analysis and Reporting category had four contenders, with each name and title of the journalistic piece that secured their nomination called out. The cameras focused on each individual contender as their names were announced and Rían remained looking nonchalant, despite her heart pounding in her chest. Two awards already sat on their table, and being the last category, IIM's hopes of a hat-trick rested on her now, but she was up against the oldest, the more experienced and the best the business had to offer.

“And the winner is...”

A hush descended, everyone in the room holding their breath in the brief pause at this hotly contested this category.

“...For the in-depth investigation into the political cover-up of electronic hospital records ... Rían Breasel,” the announcer called out. IIM's table erupted, but in their midst Rían maintained her composure. She stood, and with more grace than she knew she possessed, stepped to the stage. Now for the hard part. She had no speech prepared, not expecting to win. She waited for the noise to die down, her mind racing and took a deep breath.

“A dhaoine uaisle. Is onóir mhór dom buíochas a ghlacadh libh as ucht an duais seo a bhronnadh orm anocht. Ní raibh uaim

ach an fhírinne a thabhairt chun solais agus mar gheall ar seo thug sibh onóir domsa agus onóir don fhírinne. Gabhaim buíochas ó mo chroí libh. Oíche mhaith agaibh.”

“(Ladies and Gentlemen. It is with great honour that I thank you for this award tonight. All I want to do is bring truth to light and for this you’ve honoured me, you’ve honoured truth. From my heart, I thank you and good night.)”

She stood back to tumultuous applause, smiling shyly before leaving the stage.

“Nice touch with the Gaelige,” Ed commented when she returned. Before she could reply, something, or rather someone caught his attention, and he manoeuvred his way through the tables to catch up with his target, who looked about to leave.

“Mr Morand,” he said, and the man turned around, as did the older man accompanying him. He took Ed by surprise, not expecting Morand to appear so young.

“Yes?” Morand answered, his accent a soft American twang, his smile reflected in his eyes.

“Ed Delaney, of IIM,” he introduced himself. “I was a client of your Dublin office.” Morand accepted the proffered handshake.

“Mr Delaney, pleasure to meet you. Congratulations to your team tonight. IIM must be very proud,” Morand said, his accent growing stronger.

“Well, yes sir, we're proud of our entire team,” he managed to answer. Morand gave him a puzzled look.

“You were a client up until about a year ago, I think. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Ed said, thrown off-guard and amazed to be remembered out of the thousands who availed of his company's service. “I know you have a reputation for not doing interviews, but would you consider an exclusive with IIM?”

The smile never faltered, but wariness crept into Morand's eyes.

“As you say, Mr Delaney, I don't do interviews,” he replied, but paused to glance past Ed to the IIM table. Ed followed his gaze. “However,” Morand continued, “I might make an exception if Miss Breasel did the interviewing.”

“Ah,” Ed answered, “it's not her field.”

Morand shrugged.

“Maybe some other time then,” he replied turning to the old man waiting on him.

“Ah, Mr Morand,” Ed called after him again and the young man turned around to him, a bemused expression on his face.

“That won't be a problem.”

“Excellent,” Morand answered, his smile widening a little more. He watched Morand's eyes flicker for an instant back towards Rían before he turned away again. Morand moved

gracefully through the room followed by the older man with him, whom Ed assumed to be his aide. He sighed, happy with securing the opportunity of an exclusive with one of the most elusive businessmen and bachelors in the world. Now he needed to break news of the assignment to Rían.

Chapter 3

Belfast, Ulster

Voting for the Northern Assembly Elections closed at 9pm. Every conceivable measure to counteract any attempt at tampering or interfering with the electronic voting systems were in place, and the results of the ballots from across the six counties were expected soon. The double-checking and systems verification now caused the delay in returning a result.

Conor Uí Neill waited with impatience at his party's constituency head office in Belfast. As the newest kid on the political block, he knew he had no right to expect any sort of a victory, but strong ambitions and high expectations drove him. Added to those qualities he also believed in the prophecies the old man read to him since he was a child. Devlin, the old man, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Calm yourself boy," he said. "The time is almost upon us."

Chapter 4

The Liberties in Dublin underwent re-urbanisation during the previous ten or fifteen years, stealing Temple Bar's title of Dublin's trendiest area and making it one of the safest parts of the city to walk about in. Gardaí (*police*) patrolled on a regular basis, so she was taken by surprise when she was grabbed from behind. She spun around, fist at the ready to retaliate but stopped short at hitting the bedraggled old woman who clung to her. She appeared homeless, dressed in old, torn clothing, smeared in dirt, as was her face and hands.

"They will be coming for you, soon," she rasped.

"Excuse me?" Rían demanded.

"They know who you are, what you are," the old woman grabbed her arm with both her hands. Rían tried to pull loose.

"I think you're confusing me with someone else."

"No. You are the one. Be watchful, but not everything they say are lies."

"Who are they?" Rían asked trying to be patient with this woman who seemed to grow agitated by the minute.

"You will know them when they come for you."

Without warning, she released Rían and fled down a side street with more speed than Rían would have accredited to her.

Rían peered down the same lane only moments later but found no sign of the raggedy old lady.

“I have an assignment for you,” Ed said by way of a greeting as she arrived at her desk. “My office, now.” She took her jacket off, throwing it over her chair and followed him in.

“Ever hear of Seth Morand?” he asked closing the door behind her. She sat down.

“Didn’t you mention him last night?” she answered.

“Yes,” he said, “car behind ours, he’s the CEO of TOTAL.”

She shrugged and shook her head. The names meant nothing to her.

“It’s one of those holistic health and fitness centres,” he began. “This guy owns a chain of them around the world. Started as a fitness instructor and developed his own brand of everything, from herbal remedies to the ultimate weight loss programs, all before the age of 30. He’s now settled in Dublin, something about liking our country and our history. I finally got him to agree to an interview and you’re doing it.”

“A fitness instructor,” she exclaimed. “If he’s so interested in getting his story out let Darren talk to him. That’s his area, not mine.”

“You don’t seem to realise how difficult it is getting an interview with this guy. He doesn’t do them, full stop. The only

way to get him to do this was agree you'd do it," he said.

"Why? Why would you do that?" she demanded.

"What? Tell him my award-winning journalist won't lower her standards, can't adapt to a different genre?" he replied. He took a deep breath. "Take a scientific standpoint, do an expose on him and the company, whatever... but I can tell you whatever he and his company is doing, it's working. Don't ask me how, but it does."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Ed answered. "Do you recall all the weight I lost last year?" She nodded. "Well, you won't remember this, but the original smoking ban twenty or twenty-five years ago allowed people to continue smoking outside. Along came the total ban about ten years ago and any of us still sucking on the fags couldn't even have one just walking down the street anymore, so I decided to give them up.

"That turned out to be about as successful as a snowstorm in the Sahara. The weight piled on and I was still smoking. About 18 months ago, the wife signs me up to this guy's health centre, and now look at me, a shadow of my former self and not a ciggie in sight."

She remained sceptical.

"And the scientific bit? Were drugs involved? Have you become addicted and you now you have to sign up for his anti-

drug detox?" she asked with a hint of sarcasm.

He gave her a withering glare.

"Nothing so exciting. They did a psychological profile, did a fitness regime and gave me herbal tablets to help with the cravings."

"Still not convinced," she said. "You haven't told me anything earth shattering that willpower or self-determination couldn't accomplish."

"Well, whatever this guy's secret is, it's made him a worldwide billionaire. Take this as an opportunity to stretch yourself, journalistically speaking, reach out into the realm of the unknown. You're doing the interview and that's final," he stated, leaving no more room for argument.

"Fine," she snapped and walked out of his office.

"His secretary will call you," Ed shouted after her as the door slammed shut. God! She screamed in her head. What a day!

The secretary didn't hang about, calling shortly after she sat back at her desk. The voice was male and sounded young, but divulged little in the way of personal details regarding Morand when she quizzed him. The man seemed to have a busy schedule, but cleared an entire afternoon to see her. Rían didn't know whether or not to be flattered at such attention, but she was now scheduled to meet the man himself the following day.

In the meantime, she did her research, checking him out on the web, making contact with a few of her other sources and carefully guarded contacts. Seth Morand, it seemed, was indeed a self-made man, with multiple websites devoted to him, all unofficial. He was big news in the US, being somewhat of a celebrity and a player on the social scene. Photographs of him, usually with pretty girls on his arm were abound and easily accessible on the net.

None of this superstardom endeared him to her. She was a serious journalist after all, goddamn it, not a social columnist. The only thing of interest to her was this guy's education. For a relatively young guy he held degrees in Health & Nutrition, Psychology, Business as well as qualifications in Eastern Medicine, Homeopathy and other esoteric health related areas.

Going further back into his past revealed a tougher, edgier side with him winning awards and fights in mixed martial arts tournaments, and hidden in the depths of the web, she found allegations of injured opponents, but those were unsubstantiated and she dismissed them as idle gossip.

The following afternoon she arrived at the TOTAL Dublin office in Ballsbridge, at the appointed time, surprised as he came to reception to meet her in person. As she regarded him, she surmised he followed his own fitness advice. His movements were fluid, flowing and without hesitation. He screamed of

supreme confidence and self-assurance, dressed in what she guessed to be an expensive suit and tailored judging by the way it shaped and moved with him.

He was taller than she expected, and while he was certainly photogenic, he seemed more handsome in person than the pictures suggested. His smile was what radiated the most, engaging and without doubt designed to put anyone in his company at ease and as cynical and analytical as she tried to be, she understood how easily someone could succumb to his charms. She, however, was determined not to. This was a crap assignment as far as she was concerned, to which she was holding Seth Morand responsible. He greeted her warmly and led her directly to his office.

"I've read your material and leaflets," she opened with her prepared line as she sat down, "and you are not doing anything different that willpower or self-determination couldn't accomplish." She gave herself scarcely any time to glance about, to get a feel for the man from any personal possessions in the room. To her surprise, she found it sparsely decorated. Seth Morand lounged against his desk in front of her. He'd offered her water or tea as they entered, but she declined both. He, however, took a bottle of water from a mini refrigerator close to her. His company's brand she noted.

"Absolutely true," he answered enthusiastically. "But most

people want a quick fix and therein lies the problem. As we both know there is no such thing. TOTAL, as I'm sure you already know stands for 'Totally Organic, Totally Active Living' and that's all I promote, simply helping my clients to set up small attainable and achievable goals, quick wins if you will, helping them to go on and improve *that* willpower, self-determination and develop a desire to keep going." He smiled again.

"And just how do you ensure these 'quick wins'?" she asked.

"Our job is to help the client work it out for themselves. They know their bodies best, what does and doesn't work, what their own strengths and weaknesses are. A lot is common sense, but it doesn't hit home until it's pointed out. All I do is point the way."

"So you rely on your clients being honest?"

He shrugged.

"Honesty *is* the best policy after all. The only ones they're hurting by lying is themselves and problems only arise when they do."

"For example?" she asked. He took a sip of water and thought for a moment before his face lit up.

"The award ceremony the other night, I noticed you were drinking champagne. Now supposing you went to loads of galas, which I'm sure a person of your standing in the media would be

invited to, and other such parties, on a regular basis, maybe drinking at all of them. Now, if you came in here and signed up but lied about how much alcohol you regularly consumed, or more to the point, you lied to yourself about how much you drank, our fitness plan for you would fail, because you weren't being honest with yourself."

"But you can ensure honesty?" she asked. He chuckled.

"The body always betrays the lie," he answered.

"Meaning?"

"We all give out signals, signs that are often at odds with what we're saying. It's the art of body language."

"So you apply your psychology?" she said. He smiled. She did her homework, and it pleased him. At least she was treating this with some degree of seriousness and professionalism.

"Yes," he answered. "I use a system of standard questionnaires, carried out by trained staff and they pay close attention for body reactions or contradictions in answers. The programs, diets, fitness routines are then all created and designed for each individual."

"And the homoeopathy?" she asked.

"I adhere to one simple philosophy," he stated.

"Care to share?"

He laughed.

"It's quite simple, while you are here, attending the clinics

and fitness centre, you can't take anything that alters your state of body or mind," he answered.

"Such as?"

"The usual, no drugs, alcohol, caffeine, or processed sugars," he listed off.

"So no chocolate then," she replied, a hint of sarcasm creeping in.

"Nope," he answered, "cocoa based with added sugars. All we allow are natural remedies."

"Just herbs, huh?" she said.

"Exactly," he answered, sounding victorious.

"But aren't drugs and modern medicines derived from herbs and herbal remedies? Foxglove is used in digitalis, St John's Wort in hormone replacements and other supplements. Cannabis?"

He laughed.

"Don't you scientific types ever come up with more compelling arguments than those? When's the last time you got high on...let's say, nettle tea, or overdosed on oregano or basil?"

"Overdid the tarragon on chicken once," she answered deadpan, not taking him seriously, but he either failed to notice, or chose to ignore her sardonic attitude.

"Any side effects? Rushed to the ER to have your stomach pumped? Take any counteracting medication?" he argued.

"Does indigestion tablets count, or would they contravene

the no drugs rule?" she retorted. He chuckled, but didn't reply.

Complete silence reigned for a moment.

"I can go into much more detail over dinner," he said.

She stopped scribbling on her ePad and glanced up surprised, which turned into suspicion.

"Excuse me?" she said by way of reply.

"Have dinner with me, tonight," he said.

"I don't think so."

"Tomorrow night, then."

"You don't take no for an answer, do you?"

He chuckled.

"If I stopped after the first no, I wouldn't be where I am today. Have dinner with me," he insisted, and she noted that while his charismatic smile remained, his face now took on an expression of intensity and drive.

"Absolutely not," she refused again.

"Why not? I'm not trying to influence this interview. You'll write whatever you write. All I want to do is treat a beautiful lady to dinner."

"Do you honestly expect such cheesy lines to work?" she said, the web images of pretty girls on his arm springing to mind.

"They usually do," he answered, matter of fact.

"Not here they won't, and I don't mix work with my personal life. I'm sure someone of your social standing can

appreciate that," she said.

"I don't see any harm mixing a little pleasure with business," he shot back.

"Not in my world," she answered and stood up. "I think you've given me all I need," and she left before he could raise another argument. Seth stepped out of his office after her but she was nowhere to be seen. Fergus, his secretary stood and handed him a file.

"That didn't seem too promising," he said. Seth just shrugged, taking the file from him. "As you requested, I got as much info on your latest obsession as I could," he said, "even down to dress size, as instructed." Seth scanned the pages. "You owe Derek, the studio's wardrobe guy, dinner," Fergus added.

"Me personally?" Seth asked, "or you do and I'm paying for it?"

"I'll take what's behind door number two please," Fergus replied with a cheeky grin. "You can thank him for the rest of the gossip on her too, and not much to tell. No boyfriend, or girlfriend, that anyone knows of, does a lot of charity work too."

"So do I," Seth stated.

"True, but in her case, she's discreet and it doesn't hit the headlines," Fergus replied and Seth threw him a sideways glare. "Anyway," Fergus went on, "the reader's digest version is, she rarely drinks, no drugs, likes classical music, Techno and heavy

rock, runs for fun and walks the 3.5 kilometres from the train station to work and back, every day. The only dirt I found was points on her driving licence for speeding, hardly crime-stoppers stuff, but seems she likes to go a little fast in the car.”

“A girl after my own heart,” Seth murmured.

“Maybe a dagger in your heart judging from the way she stormed out of here,” Fergus replied. Seth disappeared back into his office without another word. As the door shut, Fergus sighed. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered.

Chapter 5

Rían sat outside at the wooden picnic bench in the late evening with Lucy, her German Shepherd-Lab cross. She didn't intend relocating to Arles and so far from Rathvilly, but the views of the Carlow valley and the surrounding Dublin, Wicklow and Blackstairs Mountains made the move irresistible. Lucy sat facing her, tennis ball in her mouth, hoping Rían would play fetch, but her owner seemed intently focused on the antiquated laptop sitting on the bench. An old machine but Rían kept it running with whatever upgrades she could find. The latest machines on the market proved not to be quite as robust as she would have liked and this old one allowed her to work outside like this.

"Voice activate or manual?" the computer asked as she opened the word-processing application.

"Manual," she answered, having learned some time ago that voice-activated word processing didn't suit her 'thinking out loud' style. Trying to decipher what she said, and what she meant to say, just took too long. Now an archaic skill, manually typing remained her favourite method of composing her articles.

She paused to watch the lights of nearby Killeen village come to life, gathering her thoughts about her encounter with Seth Morand, not knowing quite what to make of him. Lucy decided to lie down on the seat, letting the ball fall to the ground,

while Rían sipped herbal tea, now starting to go cold in the evening air. As the number of lights in the valley grew she snapped out of her reverie, annoyed at herself for daydreaming about Morand. She picked up Lucy's ball, throwing it down the garden with fervour. With an article to be written, she launched into it, and him, with similar vigour.

Not her finest work by any standards and she hoped Ed would decide to shelve it. Her opinions of both Morand and TOTAL were a shade away from being described as scathing, barely disguised in eloquent wording. She refused to change anything, hoping to secure the article's demise, but no such luck. Ed argued about her lack of depth, missing passion and insight, but Morand didn't give her much to go on in the way of personality, she countered, unwilling to pander to any of his egotistical wants. She concluded him to be shallow and an attention seeker. Ed put his expert hand to it, making minor adjustments before forwarding on to the printers and at the touch of a keystroke became downloadable in an instant to every handheld device and anyone in the world.

She put Seth out of her mind; more important issues overshadowed a glorified fitness instructor. The launch date of a newly developed wave generator for the Atlantic approached, and there her interest lay, wanting to be at its inauguration. That's what she wanted to be concentrating on, and tackling the so-

called eco-minded politicians who delayed its construction and implementation for over two years. Back to real work, back to normal.

She finalised her travel arrangements and accommodation for the launch when a large box arrived at her desk. Suspicious, she opened a corner and tried peeking inside. None the wiser she opened the box fully. By this time, a small audience gathered. Ed, a sucker for surprises, saw the box arriving. With the lid off, she found a note atop the tissue paper. Picking it out she lifted the paper beneath to reveal a bodice, in the faintest shade of pink she'd ever seen, and below that again, a full-length skirt in the finest white silk. She opened the note to discover it was from Seth Morand. All it said was 'Gala, tomorrow night. 8pm' and signed by him. An ostentatious script, she noted. Showy, just like the man himself. Annoyed, she picked up one of her business cards and wrote 'NO' on the back, complete with exclamation mark, stapling both cards together. She folded the tissue paper back over, placed his note and her answer on top and closed the box.

"Are you mad?" Teresa exclaimed. "Tomorrow night's gala is one of the highlights of the social calendar and one of the biggest charity events in the country. Everyone who's anyone will be going. You've got to go!"

"No! I don't," Rían retorted. "And certainly not with him."

"But..." Teresa tried to explain. Rían forestalled her.

“No. I’m not going to be bought over by fancy clothes, big flashy events or just to be seen on his arm. I hate these things. There are too many people at them. Too many people I’ve interviewed.” She returned the box to the porter.

“Please, just send it back,” she said. He nodded while the others shook their heads in disbelief and dismay.

Word spread throughout the entire building and she spent the rest of the day listening to why she should be going. By early afternoon, she’d had enough and she left, also warning Ed she’d work from home the following day. Ed knew her game plan. She couldn’t receive any more gifts or invitations if she wasn’t around. If she thought she would be safe at home, she was mistaken. As she drove around to park at the back of the house, her heart sank. On the picnic table sat not one box, but three.

“Some guard dog you are,” she said to Lucy who stood on her hind legs, front paws on the table, sniffing at the boxes. She checked the largest box, confirming it to be the one she’d returned not long ago, but with a different note this time, reading ‘Pick up at your place, 6:30pm’. The man was certainly persistent. She checked the other two boxes and found they contained shoes and expensive jewellery to match.

She brought them inside and phoned directory inquiries for any courier service operating this late in the evening, disappointed to find none readily available. She’d have to wait

until the morning to reach anyone. She left the boxes on the dining table and tried to banish all thoughts from her mind, but curiosity got the better of her and she succumbed to its lure. She reasoned with herself that there was no harm in trying them on. After all, how often did she get the opportunity to try on clothing this fine? To her surprise, they fitted perfectly, too perfect a fit for mere guesswork and she wondered how he knew, suspecting someone in the studio of divulging such information. The dog stared at her in amusement as she twirled and swished about.

“Well, whaddaya think?” Rían asked of her furry companion, thinking her hair would be a problem, before catching herself. No, not a problem as she wasn't going. She undressed with care and placed everything back.

The next day her usual decisive nature abandoned her and she uncharacteristically dithered about whether or not to go. She couldn't deny that Seth Morand possessed a certain presence, charisma and charm, and she could understand how women fell for it. He also laughed at resistance. 'No' became a challenge to him and she didn't want to be the subject of his intense attention. Yet she found herself wanting to see him again, annoying herself even more. With 90 minutes to go, she made up her mind, and phoned her hairdresser.

“Brian? I need help,” she said and explained. As luck would have it he was free, but needed time to organise the kids and 40

minutes later arrived at her house. In less than an hour, Brian worked his magic, strawberry blond curls cascading about her face. He finished as a helicopter approached and landed in the garden, avoiding the shrubs with expert precision. Brian pushed his glasses up on his nose, and wished her luck as he gathered his things and left. Lucy growled at the helicopter, but as soon as a man stepped out, she changed to barking. Rían locked up the house, trying to quieten Lucy, bribing her with doggy treats, and approached the helicopter, where the man helped her in. He introduced himself as Danny, Mr Morand's driver. Mr Morand, he explained would be meeting her at the National Concert Hall, the Gala venue.

In Dublin, they landed atop an apartment block, Danny escorting her to the elevators and they descended to the basement to the car. A crowd gathered at the walls of the NCH to watch arrivals, and they awaited their turn to drive through the entrance. As the car drew nearer, Seth descended the steps of the Concert Hall, opening the door for her, his hand extended to help her out. Determined not to give in to him, she scowled as she took his hand and exited the car. He gave her a thorough glance.

"Wow," he whispered in her ear. "You look gorgeous," he said, wrapping her arm about his, escorting her up the steps.

"Thanks," she muttered, feeling self-conscious as they entered the building.

"Why the frown?" he asked.

"It's just... I'm not used to... I'm not comfortable in these situations," she admitted.

"You've nothing to worry about, just do what I do, smile and nod at the appropriate places. It seems to work for me," he said taking two glasses of champagne offered by a nearby waiter. He handed one to her, but she shook her head. "Have one," he said, "it'll help you relax."

"Oh really?" she asked a little sarcastically. "Doesn't this violate your 'no alcohol' rule?"

"No because you're not a client, and no breach of ethics here either, in case you're wondering."

"Maybe not for you," she threw back.

"Your article is written. Over and done with, where's the problem?" he asked amiably.

"The problem I have is your bullying tactics," she retorted. "I sent these back to you," she said, indicating the clothes. "I told you I didn't want to go. Why are you doing this?" He pulled her up short, gripping her arm and she saw a sternness to his expression.

"Did I drag you here tonight? No. Did I physically twist your arm until you gave in? No. Why am I doing this? I'm just trying to impress you enough for you to have dinner with me," he answered, glancing around to ensure no one caught their little

spat. He let her go, putting his hand to the small of her back to guide her towards the buffet.

“By the way, was that your attempt at being objective?” he asked. She shot a fiery glare at him and he laughed.

“It's not my area of expertise,” she fired back.

“I could tell,” he retorted with amusement. She put her glass down and turned to leave. He caught hold of her arm again and gave her a questioning glance.

“Let me go,” she said through gritted teeth.

“And where are you going to go, home?” he questioned. “Your last train left 40 minutes ago.”

“The same way I came,” she answered. He shook his head.

“Pilot was only hired for the one round trip. Sorry, sweetheart, seems you're stuck with me. Now, if you took that iron rod out of your ass and relaxed a bit, you might actually start to enjoy yourself and have a little fun. I'm not a bad guy, all I'm asking for is a chance.” He released her arm. Admittedly, he did sound sincere, and damn, he turned that smile on again.

“Fine,” she answered and turned to pick up her glass, taking a mouthful. Seth grinned to himself.

The night consisted of a benefit concert in the main auditorium, followed by après-concert drinks back out in both the upper balcony and the lobby, which she enjoyed. True to his word, he acted the perfect gentleman throughout. She already

knew many of the other attendees, and while she hated such grand social occasions, it proved to be an enjoyable evening. She found herself glancing about for Seth only to find him doing likewise for her.

In the early hours of the morning she shyly asked him if they could leave. Puzzled by her request, she explained she felt a bit drunk and couldn't drink anymore, and if she didn't go now, she was afraid she'd do something silly. He gave a soft laugh and put his arm about her, guiding her out of the building. His car pulled up as they reached the bottom of the steps and Danny jumped out to open the rear door for them before driving to Seth's apartment. Seth helped her out of the car and into the lift, putting his arm around her to steady her. She pushed him away.

"I'm not sleeping with you," she stated, "or anything else with you, for that matter." A smile played at the corner of his lips.

"Thought never crossed my mind," he answered. She eyed him suspiciously as he led her to his apartment. His thumbprint, and a microchip embedded in his wrist, opened the door with an almost imperceptible click. He led her inside. A figure appeared at the end of the hallway and Rían stopped short.

"That's Mrs Hanson, my housekeeper," he whispered into her ear.

"You have a housekeeper?" she asked astounded. He nodded, continuing further into the apartment. She paused to

take her shoes off so walking wouldn't be such a hazardous sport and followed him to the main living area, sitting down on the first sofa she reached. Seth disappeared into another room as the housekeeper regarded her with a stern expression.

"I guess you get to see this all the time, him bringing strange girls home," she said by way of making conversation and attempting to break the ice.

"No, dear," Mrs Hanson replied, "you're the first one he's ever brought back." Rían's eyebrows arched in surprise and the old lady left the room, while Seth returned with a glass in his hand. He sat down beside her, handing the glass to her. Whatever the glass contained was a strange shade of green, immediately triggering suspicion.

"Here, drink this. You'll thank me in the morning."

She sniffed the contents and made a face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Call it my own personal recipe for a hangover cure. I know it doesn't smell great," he said. She hesitated, plucking up the courage to take a mouthful. She swallowed and grimaced, tasting worse than it smelled. She tried handing the glass back to him.

"Don't be such a baby. Take another mouthful," he advised, looking so sincere that she believed him and tried a second helping, but no way would she take a third. He took the glass from her this time.

“I’ll show you to the guest bedroom. If you need a hand getting out of those clothes, I’d be more than happy to oblige,” he said. She gave him a tight smile.

“Nice try, but I think I can manage, thanks,” she replied and followed him down the hallway.

Chapter 6

The soft click of a door woke her and she opened her eyes, finding Mrs Hanson leaving a tray on the dresser. The old woman left without a word and Rían sat up, stretching, surprised to feel refreshed instead of hung over. Seth's miracle cure sure seemed to work. Breakfast consisted of toast and a smoothie, no doubt another of his recipes. She also spotted clothes on the dresser chair; jeans in her size, a tee shirt and a cashmere jumper, appearing to be a little too large for her. She got a hint of cologne and guessed the garment belonged to Seth. A pair of casual trainers completed the ensemble. She took a quick shower, eating breakfast as she dressed.

She left the room and wandered down the hallway towards music. She hadn't paid much attention to the place last night but it opened out into a vast space, and she found Seth at the opposite end, a short staff in his hand and a look of intense concentration on his face. Sweat glistened on his body as he worked through kata's and other martial art forms she recognised. He wore traditional loose pants and stepped barefooted across the width of the room as he spun the staff, putting both the weapon and his body through its paces. Her initial assessment of him proved accurate as she scrutinised his well-defined and bare torso, shimmering with perspiration. She stepped closer, making as

little sound as possible so as not to disturb his concentration. He registered her movement from the corner of his eye as she neared, and he stopped, breathing hard.

“Morning. Did you sleep ok?” he asked. She nodded.

“How’s the head?” he then asked, already guessing the answer.

“Grand,” she replied. “Thanks for the change of clothes. Your jumper?” she asked in return, eyeing up his collection of practice weapons, neatly arranged on a rack by the edge of his workout area. She picked out a bokken, a wooden practice sword.

“Yeah. Now I get to meet you again when you have to return it,” he grinned.

“I could always post it back,” she answered.

“You wouldn’t take that chance and risk having me popping up at any time,” he said. She smirked, confirming his guess that she’d been thinking that. She spun the sword, with a flick of her wrist. His grin turned to a questioning frown.

“You know how to use that?” he asked.

“A little,” she answered in a modest tone. “A few basic moves,” she added.

“Okay, show me what you’ve got,” he said, and she heard the confidence and superiority in his voice. She hesitated for a moment, thinking.

“Em, yeah, okay,” she said. With the point of the sword on the floor, she drew a semi-circle around her, a dividing line

between them. She noticed the smile on his face slipped a little. She'd just challenged him and now found himself unsure of his opponent. Seth caught a faint smile on her face, but her eyes narrowed somewhat. He gripped the staff at its midway point while she waited patiently for him to make the first move. He didn't disappoint, striking at her with surprising speed. The blow would have bruised her calf if she hadn't blocked it with the sword. She retaliated with similar speed stepping inside the staff's reach while fending off another blow and elbowed him in the ribs. He grunted and stepped out of her reach, spinning the staff and attempting an up stroke, catching her on the arm, and stinging, he thought smugly, if he went by the grimace on her face. They both stepped outside the other's reach.

"A few basic moves, huh?" he questioned.

"Okay, a couple of lessons," she conceded, and reacted quicker than he expected to his next attack, while she counterattacked without warning. They continued in similar fashion. Neither gave the other a moment's rest as they parried and deflected each other's blows. Her strength surprised him, as did her sometimes dirty tactics, such as trying to step on his bare feet and landing a left hook to his cheek. If she wanted to play like that he'd be more than happy to oblige, but she ducked under what would have been a nasty knock to the jaw. She started to perspire from the effort and she knew he wasn't being

gentle, but damn, it was good to knock the smug smile from his face.

They had different fighting styles and she noted his weaknesses, in particular, where he left himself a little too open when he swung in from his right. She waited until the next time he feigned to the left and dropped to her knees sliding on the wooden floor, sword point up. She caught him in the midriff with the sword point while she grabbed his staff from overhead. The wooden point was just sharp enough to cause the barest pinprick of blood on his skin. The smile was definitely gone now, with surprise replacing disbelief. And that too, was damn good to see. He stepped back and released the staff she was still holding. She stood up and twirled his weapon.

"I didn't know you could do that," he said, watching her warily, catching his breath.

"This is what happens when you rely on other people for information," she shot back, also breathing heavily. "They don't know everything either."

"Where did you learn to fight?" he asked.

"Various places," she answered, placing the weapons on the floor.

"Explains why you don't have any particular style, except to fight dirty," he accused her, stepping closer to her. She suppressed a laugh at his sulking but he did his damnest to hide

it.

“A girl's gotta do...,” she said by way of explanation, but she didn't get to finish as he took her head in his hands and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. She placed her hands on his chest, feeling his heart pounding. She pushed him, hard, and he backed away.

“I am not one of your conquests,” she growled at him and turned on her heel and left. Unable to move himself, he let her leave, stunned, and annoyed, and a mixture of everything else. No one ever bested him like that, nor rejected him so completely. Fergus was right; she was an obsession since that first night he'd seen her. Last night he'd been on his best behaviour, hoping, no, anticipating his gentlemanly ways would be enough to win her over only to find she'd whooped his ass this morning. He shook himself out of his reverie and his brooding and his smile returned. The wooing of Rían would have to take a different route.

“A little tougher than you expected?” Mrs Hanson asked, suppressing a smile of her own. She came out to investigate the commotion and now disappeared back into the kitchen, smirking to herself.

Rían walked to Heuston train station, and while she didn't have her wallet or commuter ticket on her, her thumbprint and the info on the chip in her wrist would be enough to ensure she

got on the train. Peter stood at the gate scanning tickets and he let her on without a problem. His greeting was as cheerful as always and it helped put a smile back on her face, but she sank back into brooding on the 45-minute journey home.

The old woman's bizarre warning came to mind and it rattled her, more than she cared to admit, and she'd remained edgy since it happened. She now replayed it, questions about whom she had to be wary of. Was it Seth Morand? Why did he infuriate her so much? Unable to provide any alternative to the old woman's warning, she arrived at the only logical conclusion; the old lady was a complete nutcase, but Rían's instincts hummed uneasily.

She hailed a taxi from outside the train station at Carlow, but when she got back to the house, she found a small bouquet of flowers lying on the picnic table, with a note. She ignored them while she reached for the spare key in order to retrieve her cash card to pay the driver. When he left, she opened the note, which contained only one word, 'sorry'. Boy, this guy worked fast. No point in letting the flowers suffer she thought and took them inside and into water.

"You're fired," she said to Lucy on the way in. "Your guard-dogging days are over, fur ball!"

[Purchase on Amazon](#)

[Purchase on Elnó's Store](#)